

INTERVIEW WITH VERNON BYRD  
BY ED GROSSMAN MAY 7, 2001  
HOMER, ALASKA

MR. GROSSMAN: I am Ed Grossman and this is Vernon Byrd. It's the 7<sup>th</sup> of May in the year 2001. We are here at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters. Vernon is an icon here. He has been here for many, many years. The subject that I was hoping to discuss with him here today is the Aleutian Tern. It was an Army T boat that was used on the Refuge as support for many years and has since moved on. Now they have a much bigger, better vessel. We have other T boats in service with the Fish and Wildlife Service and in the end; hope to interview a number of the skippers and people familiar with working off of those. So, thank you Vernon, very much for agreeing to do this interview here today. I guess first of all, for folks that will be reading about this, and transcribing and such; I know they'd have an interest in some of your background. Could you give us a little information on where it is you were born and raised, and how you spent your early years?

MR. BYRD: Sure. I was born and raised in southwestern North Carolina, in a town called Shelby. I pretty much grew up there. I went away to school at the University of Georgia. I first came to Alaska in 1968 with the Navy. I got stationed at Adak. So that was the beginning of my association with the Aleutians. One of the jobs I had there, I was a junior officer, and I had a collateral duty as a Military Wildlife Conservation Agent. That's what we were called. All of the Alaska Command bases had somebody designated to work with the conservation agencies. That's how I got to know people on the Refuge; Bob Jones and Ed Bailey were at Cold Bay then. I got to work with them basically while I was in the Navy in a liaison way. I ultimately got a job with the US Fish and Wildlife Service after I got out of the Navy. That was the deal.

MR. GROSSMAN: And Bob Jones, was that "Sea Otter" Jones? Was that his nickname?

MR. BYRD: Yeah.

MR. GROSSMAN: How about your education?

MR. BYRD: I went to the University of Georgia for undergraduate work. And then I did some graduate work at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks in the mid 1970's. I didn't finish up. I was on leave without pay with the Service [Navy] and then, about ten years later, I did get leave without pay enough to finish, to do a Masters at the University of Idaho.

MR. GROSSMAN: I know the Aleutian Refuge has an extensive sea bird emphasis, was that an emphasis in your education?

MR. BYRD: Not originally. In undergraduate work there was no focus on that of course. But I got real interested while I was in the Navy at Adak. When I went back to graduate school I really focused first on the Alaskan Canada Goose at Fairbanks and then on sea birds when I worked at Idaho. I mean, I used data from the Refuge to work up.

MR. GROSSMAN: In your military service you were in Adak. Were you at other stations?

MR. BYRD: No. I did my whole active duty at Adak. They allowed me to extend twice. The Admiral wanted to know if I was 'digging up daisies with a spoon' out there. They didn't have many people request to extend, but I was so interested in the birds and working with Jones and those guys. It was just a super opportunity for me. I did my whole active duty at Adak.

MR. GROSSMAN: Wow that is impressive. How about a little bit about your family?

MR. BYRD: I have a wife who I didn't meet until I left the Aleutians for the first time I was there. Then we had two sons. Both are grown now. That's the family.

MR. GROSSMAN: Are both your sons still here in Alaska?

MR. BYRD: One is a senior at the University of Alaska at Anchorage and the other is married and living in Pennsylvania.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did either one have an interest in the career that you chose?

MR. BYRD: The boy at the University of Alaska is in Environmental Science. Not so much Wildlife Management, but a general interest in that area.

MR. GROSSMAN: Super. Your career with the Service [FWS], we've talked about mutual friends in the past; I believe you spent some time in Hawaii?

MR. BYRD: I did. I originally started at Izembek Refuge as a 'seasonal' with Bob Jones and Ed Bailey after I got out of the Navy. I ultimately went back and set up the first office for the Aleutians Islands Refuge. Then, I transferred after working in various places to the Hawaiian Islands Refuge and worked down there for about three years. I managed the Headquarters at Kauai and the Tern Island field station. Then I went back to Alaska, the Yukon delta and on Izembek and Aleutian Island and then Maritime.

MR. GROSSMAN: So, Alaska is really it?

MR. BYRD: Right.

MR. GROSSMAN: On to the Aleutian Tern. I really know very little about any of the history of it out here. I was wondering about the most basic information. Could you tell us how it came to be in service here on the Refuge?

MR. BYRD: We knew about T boats because of the Surf Bird. That was commissioned to work, I think Fred Robards first got that. Fred was in Law Enforcement, but in those days they called it Management Enforcement. Those guys were also responsible for some of the migratory bird work, including all of the waterfowl banding. In Fred's case, it was Bald Eagle work. The Surf Bird was obtained to do patrols and also do this Bald Eagle work in southeast Alaska. We knew about that. Stockton, I think, is where those surplus T Birds were. Stockton, California I think it was. We ended up finding one surplus down there. It was named the Aleutian Tern. Those Army T Boats were coastal patrol boats. They are exactly the same as a Navy YP class boats, the Yard Patrol Boats. They are exactly the same boat. The Army called them T Boats and the Navy called them YPs.

When I was in Officer Candidate School, that's what we trained on, YPs, on the James River there in Newport, Rhode Island. They are just super boats for coastal areas. They have a sixty-five foot, steel hull. But, there are a little small, and rolled pretty hard for what we used the Aleutian Tern for. The other two T Boats, the Surf Bird and later the Curlew are just perfect for southeast Alaska. And the Aleutian Tern served us well but it was a bit small. We kept her in Kodiak in the wintertime. That's where it was home ported. Then we used in it the Aleutians all summer. Palmer Seccor is actually the one who was the first project leader to use it. They got it for the wilderness surveys. Do you remember how the Wilderness Act required surveys of those areas? I think the Wilderness Act must have been in 1974, and it required that potential wilderness areas be surveyed. It gave the agencies so many years to survey their potential areas. So Palmer Seccor was hired. He had been the Assistant Manager to Bob Jones at Cold Bay. He was hired as the Wilderness Biologist for the Aleutian Islands. He got a chance to use the Aleutian Tern. That was the first time it was used. In 1972, I think we got it in 1971. In 1972 Palmer used it in the Aleutians for basic inventory information about the concentrations of sea birds and marine mammals. Over about a three-year period the Aleutian Tern was used extensively in the Aleutians, well, it was two years, to support wilderness work. Then, I got hired as the Manager there in the Aleutians and we used it for another four or five years to support the early Aleutian Canada Goose work, and all of the Fox trapping work that we did. So it lived in the Aleutians in the summertime. The crew just basically holed up in bad weather and waited until we needed them. It essentially lived out there with us, that was the deal.

MR. GROSSMAN: That's very impressive. So, the actual name, The Aleutian Tern, if I caught it right, was already on the boat before you guys got it?

MR. BYRD: No, we named it The Aleutian Tern. I don't know...it probably just had a number. The Army probably has just a number assigned to it.

MR. GROSSMAN: So it spent it's summers in the Aleutians and it's winters in Kodiak?

MR. BYRD: Yes, we'd get her back to Kodiak by early September usually. The earliest we tried to take her out, well, we tried to take her out at the end of March one year when we were going to take Aleutian Canada Geese down to Agattu. We had them staged at Attu, and we left Kodiak on March 31<sup>st</sup>. It took us thirty-one days to get to Attu!

MR. GROSSMAN: My goodness!

MR. BYRD: It was up the down staircase! We just had to run and then hide and then run and then hide. So we didn't leave that early after that. We waited a little longer.

MR. GROSSMAN: I can understand that! So how about this; they are notoriously slow boats?

MR. BYRD: We made about seven or eight knots probably at top speed.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did you have ports of call for fuel and such, like Dutch Harbor or...?

MR. BYRD: Oh man, we'd stop way before there. We had pretty good fuel capacity. We basically didn't have much water capacity, because they had converted most of the tanks. Fresh water was really more of a limitation than fuel. We did fuel at Chignik and we fueled at Sand Point, Dutch Harbor and Adak. You could get fuel at Adak then. Shimia also, we could actually get some fuel at Shimia then. We fueled everywhere. And we took water from everything from passenger ships that would give us some to anyplace we took stop.

MR. GROSSMAN: Your re-supply for food and such, you could get at the same ports?

MR. BYRD: Yep, that's what we did. And we carried a fair amount of canned goods aboard. In those days we pretty much just used C rations for the field camps. [Laughing]

MR. GROSSMAN: It's a little more ritzy now!

MR. BYRD: Yeah, now it's sprouts and tofu! We couldn't get guys to eat the stuff we ate then.

MR. GROSSMAN: So with all of these stops, this boat was probably somewhat of a fixture, or the face of the Fish and Wildlife Service in the Aleutians.

MR. BYRD: It was, and all along the Alaskan peninsula. We'd spend time in different places as we came and went. In fact, one of the deck hands named Chris Anderson was later, and maybe still is, he was a few years ago, worked for the Aleutian Housing Authority. He would take his slides along when he would go into the villages. They were the ones that were responsible for the HUD housing and so on. Chris told me that he

would go and take his photographs that he took in the mid 1970's. A lot of these kids that he took photos of then, are now people that he is dealing with. So it's really funny. He said it gives him an "in" to the villages. We knew people all up and down the line. At Atka we stopped at periodically. We never usually passed one up because we were just running from place to place. You know, hiding for a while.

MR. GROSSMAN: The projects that you worked on, I know that you mentioned the Aleutian Canada and such, and obviously early sea bird work. I know today, the larger vessel you have sees a lot of charter time. Did you have other projects unrelated to the Refuge at that time? Like charters?

MR. BYRD: We didn't have much. We did occasionally have somebody that really needed help with some project, but we didn't actively seek to charter. Like now, we do that to fill in holes where we've got projects over a span of time and then we don't have a need for a couple of weeks. We fill that out. Now the Tekla runs, well she's got a winter trip in February/March every year. And this year she went out in April and just came back Saturday. We're going to send her out again next week until September. She runs now, most of the year basically where the Aleutian Tern didn't. So it was just a core season. We kept her busy from literally, because she had to come from Kodiak, from April to September. Then she was just tied up in the winter. The Skipper lived in Kodiak.

MR. GROSSMAN: Oh he did? And your offices were where?

MR. BYRD: In Adak. There was no Maritime Refuge. It was the Aleutian Islands Refuge. But we also had all of those other little Refuges like Siminov and Boguslov that were created separately that were aggregated under Maritime. The HQ offices were at Adak. We talked about, we were planning to maybe set up a bid old float system that we could keep the boat out there in the winter. The Skipper was thinking about that. But eventually, she needed major repair and folks decided it wasn't worth putting a lot of money into the Aleutian Tern. The idea was to try to get a bigger boat. But for a few years, there was no boat and we just chartered for short time periods. It was quite a few years we just chartered. Eventually, we got the Teckla. The Aleutian Tern was not chartered much. It was mostly our operations.

MR. GROSSMAN: How many years of service did she see?

MR. BYRD: I think we got her in 1971, and I think she operated through the 1978-79 season, so about eight or nine years. That's when it needed a major engine replacement and the decision was made not to do that. The idea was; I think they actually had another boat located. It was a seized shrimp boat or something that they thought we could get. But it turned out that it wasn't really rigged for the North Pacific. They had already surplused the Aleutian Tern when they found that out. I was working on Yukon Delta by then so I wasn't directly involved with that process, but that was my understanding.

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you know where the boat headed after?

MR. BYRD: I know that it went to Fish and Game. And I don't know where it worked, I think around Kodiak. But it showed up in a yard in Seward about six or eight years ago. The deckhand that was on the Longis, his name is Dave Clemens. He lives in Anchorage now. But Davey worked as a commercial fisherman and he was living in Seward at the time. He saw it in the yard there. He figured out that it was bought by some private person. I don't know what it's being used for now. It was still there. It was sitting up on blocks in the yard and he recognized it because he knew exactly how that one was rigged. There's a few T boats around. Clem Tillion's got one that he runs as a ferry across to Halibut Cove from here in Homer. It's the Storm Bird.

MR. GROSSMAN: Oh, it that right?

MR. BYRD: Yeah, so there's a few of them around.

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you know what the State had named it?

MR. BYRD: No, I don't. You had a name there that you thought it might have been.

MR. GROSSMAN: I thought it was the Polaris.

MR. BYRD: That sounds familiar but I'm not one hundred percent sure. Davey Clemens would probably know that if you wanted to talk to him in Anchorage. But that sounds familiar to me.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did you folks make any specific modifications to it to better assist you in your work?

MR. BYRD: We converted some of the water tanks to fuel tanks. And I think we eventually put a different lift system on it. It just had the old capstan with; you just wrapped the line around it. There was no hydraulics. I think we eventually did put hydraulics on it as I recall.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did it have a deck crane or lifting skiffs?

MR. BYRD: It just had a stiff leg with the capstan system. So that was the problem. It was really slow to launch skiffs. We started out with a dory on board. That's what we were using for the lighter. But that was really a deal to hoist that thing aboard and drop it. We eventually went to inflatables.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did you have a Skipper that was full-time?

MR. BYRD: No, actually he wasn't. He was full-time in the summer. I think he was a career-seasonal or intermittent or whatever they called that appointment at the time. He didn't work all winter at all.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did you have somebody who stuck with the boat for the time that you had it, or did you have multiple people?

MR. BYRD: The same guy was there for all but the last year. George Putney.

MR. GROSSMAN: Is George still around?

MR. BYRD: The last I heard, George was maybe back in Alaska. He is an interesting character. He was a real strong Bahai. Do you know what that is? It's a religion called Bahai.

MR. GROSSMAN: I don't honestly.

MR. BYRD: I don't know a whole lot about it but he was involved with that. So once he got done with us, he went to Belgium I think, as a Bahai administrative kind of officer. Then he ended up in Yugoslavia. Then, all of the trouble happened over there. Then he went to Easter Island, off Chile for a while. This guy is really interesting and he's had about eight kids. He'd spend time with different kids. I think somebody told me he was back in Kodiak. One of his daughters is with Fish and Game down there. If you could find Putney, now he's the guy to talk to. Not only can he tell stories better than, oh like Skippers do, but he had been around for a long time. He had been in Unaslaska for years. He crab fished when they were fishing with the small boats out there. You couldn't bring the pots aboard. You just lifted it up and crawled in the pot to unload your crab. He's the real deal, that guy. So if you could get ahold of him he would be a wealth of knowledge. We stayed in touch for years. He actually came to my wedding. He just showed up, I walked down the road, and there he was. We were really good friends, but I have lost track of him in the last five years.

MR. GROSSMAN: If I find him, I'll pass on his address.

MR. BYRD: Would you? Please do, yeah. George Putney. The problem is that I don't know what his daughter's married name is. That's why I haven't been able to track him down in Kodiak. If your trail runs into George, he's the man to talk to about the Aleutian Tern. He loved her boy, and he took care of her. He was the Skipper and the Engineer. We had one deck hand typically. And basically, George just did everything. He'd get our supplies and haul them to us and take care of us. He was sort of like a mother hen.

MR. GROSSMAN: That sounds great. The other Skipper, for that one year?

MR. BYRD: I don't even know what that guy's name was. He had been on a different boat and the last year the boat operated, it was another Skipper. That's when I was on the Yukon Delta so I don't know who he was. But there is a woman who served with us for a number of years. Marsha McOwen. Marsha is now a Mate with Crowley on one of the big escort tugs out of Valdez, but she still lives here in Homer. Marsha was on the boat the same time as this other guy. I never met him. But she could tell you who he is.

MR. GROSSMAN: That sounds great. I am going to skip around a little here on you.

MR. BYRD: Go for it.

MR. GROSSMAN: Back to the name; The Aleutian Tern. How did you decide upon that?

MR. BYRD: By my recollection, I wasn't directly involved with it. I was just around. But I think it was picking a species that occurred in the Aleutians. And I think that it had the name in it. It could have been the Aleutian Goose. But the airplane, you know, that super goose airplane that Smitty, (Theron Smith) built for flying in the Aleutians?

MR. GROSSMAN: I heard about it.

MR. BYRD: Well that was the Aleutian Goose. That name was taken so we used Aleutian Tern.

MR. GROSSMAN: In your recollections of your time out on the Tern, was there any particular high points or low points from the work that you were able to accomplish off of that? Or was there any particular experience while you were on the boat in those years that stands out?

MR. BYRD: That was probably the most exciting time a guy could ever had in the FWS. Because we were in every way exploring, because the only previous survey before ours had been Olaus Muries in 1936. So, I was with Palmer on that wilderness survey as a bio-tech the first year. We were basically going to places that biologists hadn't been...Bob Jones had been to a few places in his dory, but he couldn't get to many. We were literally the first biologists that were recording data on some of these places in forty years. It was phenomenal, just phenomenal. How can you beat that? The Tern was perfect because it could nose right in close and hide anywhere. It could get right in up against the beach. We poked our way pretty much throughout the Aleutians. We had camps in the western Aleutians, studying geese, but we also were doing these broader based surveys. We thought we were Jacques Cousteau. I couldn't have been better! The government gave us a boat and told us to go find out what was out there! How are you going to beat that? There's no better careers after that! Everything was new and exciting. We were also running a goose



propagation facility at Amchitka, so the Tern helped serve that facility. She'd run back and forth to Amchitka too. We were moving geese from place to place on her. It was just perfect basically. But it was small, and there were lots of scary moments. My assistant and I ended up serving on the boat like a deckhand. We'd take turns running it. It was small for the operations. She did fine, but we put vertical stabilizers on her. That helped a bunch. But still, there were some awful rough rides.

MR. GROSSMAN: What was your most frightening experience?

MR. BYRD: We had a couple when we ended up worried about the boat; whether she could take it. I remember one fall when we stayed at Buldir until October. That's where we were studying geese and we wanted to see them leave. One part of the project involved doing some mark resighting. After the birds regained flight we'd mark a bunch of birds. We were trying to estimate the population. That required us to stay until September. Man, the storms just come real quick then, you know. You needed a window for that boat to sneak in and out. We had a little bitty window, and we were ready to go and the Tern came, but it was rough by the time we got there and a storm was coming up. We were trying to get off of the beach and we didn't have many hours to do it. The swells were coming up. It got dark and the man couldn't pick us up. We got most of the stuff back on the boat, this was at the end of the season; his deckhand couldn't see the swells well enough to make a run in. He had to stay out there overnight and wait until it light enough to pick us the next morning. By then it was just ugly. We had to swim off of the beach to get on the skiff. He couldn't get close. Then we had to run for it to Kiska, and it was awful. We made it obviously, but it was really rough. There is no place to hide out there, and we had to go for it. That was probably the biggest seas we ever ran in; they were thirty footers and this was a sixty-five foot boat. That's bad! That really bad!

MR. GROSSMAN: What kinds of winds were you looking at?

MR. BYRD: It was blowing at about eighty or eighty-five I guess. It was into the fall. It was bad enough that a tug lost a barge that same night. They came into Kiska Harbor the next day. It broke a five-inch towline. We waited in Kiska Harbor for three or four days for it to calm down. And still, the swells were so big when we went out that the very time we turned outside the harbor one of the vertical stabilizers came out of the water and came flying across and broke the window out of the side of the pilot house. We just turned back around and went back in for another couple of days.

MR. GROSSMAN: When that happens, it's your first sign that you need to turn tail.

MR. BYRD: Yeah! It wasn't windy any more but the swell was still so big, and they were so close together. Even left over [from the storm]. It just vacated space, and the boat popped out like a slingshot. One time across Amukta Pass; it's about a four hour run and it took us about fourteen hours to make it across. We were scared that time because we were

following seas and we had to drive it all of the time because the autopilot couldn't correct fast enough. We figured that we would broach if we; and once you out there, it's too big to turn around. That's really not fun.

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you recall a particular humorous experience on the boat? Or, was it more related to personalities?

MR. BYRD: Yeah, it was usually personalities. Well, we had an old stove on there that was an old oil cook stove. If we'd get rolling too bad the oil would slosh out and catch on fire on the galley floor. It happened every now and again, but the floor was metal decking so it didn't usually burn the fuel out. It never caught anything else on fire. We had a new cook on there, and we went out and the weather got rough. The oil sloshed out and caught fire, and he came tearing up to the pilothouse. The skipper was trying to drive; it was pretty bouncy, and the cook just jumped up into his arms. He caught him like this [demonstrating]. And he said, "Help, the galley's on fire!" And George said, "Well for heaven's sake, go put it out!" And the cook went, "Oh". Putney just had nerves of steel! Nothing bothered him!

MR. GROSSMAN: I can tell then, that the answer to this question is probably 'George Putney'. And that was; Who else would we interview?

MR. BYRD: Yeah, if you could find George, he's the man. No question about it. He served on her almost the whole time. She was his baby. He took care of her, and was really a master at operating a small boat. Because there is no way we could have operated if we hadn't had somebody like him. He was so good at it. He was phenomenal! He was a kind of a hero around Kodiak because during the 1964 earthquake he was driving a hundred foot vessel for the City. When he announced that there was a tidal wave coming and to go to higher ground, he went down to the harbor and tried to get his boat out. When the wave came in, it caught him and took him up town. He said his prop broke the windows out of some cars in the parking lot up at Oakcraft and Sons Hardware Store! He got turned around and he made it back out on the wave! He picked a bunch of people up out of the water, so he was a hero. He drove threw the tidal wave. So that shows how good he was at turning around on a wave!

MR. GROSSMAN: That really says something there!

MR. BYRD: He is quite a character, but his skill is the really thing that made that work for us. I don't think anybody else would normally have tried that. He was skilled. And he was fearless, but he was cautious. We hid a lot. He knew when to do it though. That was the thing.

MR. GROSSMAN: That's wonderful. You've had some many programs and studies out here that it's hard to sort them out. Would you say that the Tern maybe, compared to your other support vessels and methods; would attribute any particular success to that?

MR. BYRD: Oh yeah! That's the way all of the modern Aleutian Canada Goose projects started with the Aleutian Tern. There's no question. That got us going. The goose facility, the trans-locations, and all of the early successes were from that. All of our early sea bird monitoring camps started with the Terns support. We did all of the baseline inventory with her.

MR. GROSSMAN: So, it was a real stepping-stone.

MR. BYRD: Oh, it was absolutely fundamental. It was a huge step between Bob's Dory operation, which was phenomenal in itself, but it basically gave us access to the Refuge for the very first time. Murie had the old Brown Bear. We've got picture of the Brown Bear in the galley of the Teckla. That was the first biological boat routinely operating in the Aleutians. The Aleutian Tern was the next. And this is the third one.

MR. GROSSMAN: I assume that the Brown Bear was probably a wooden vessel?

MR. BYRD: Yeah, it must have been wooden. It was a motor-sailer. And it was the government's boat. The Fur Warden would come down the chain and seal fur pelts with it. And that's the one that Murie rode when they did the surveys in 1936 and 1937.

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you know the fate of that boat?

MR. BYRD: No, but Eric Nelson might. He's our Engineer, and is a real historian of boats.

MR. GROSSMAN: Ok, great, I'll check with him. I have skipped around a lot on you here; but is there anything else that you can think of that might add to recording the history of this boat?

MR. BYRD: Well, I mean it was just such an exciting time, we didn't know any better. I couldn't go back. [aft] You couldn't get away from the diesel fumes on it. You had to walk over the engine to get from the pilothouse to the galley. It rolled so bad it destroyed everything in the galley. When you went outside stuff would just ooze out of the "refer" [refrigerator] where it was banging jars together. The cook never learned how to rig. There were pies flying! It was a riot. No question about it, but we were young and we thought we were having fun. It was a tough deal. There were long, long, long days and rough, rough, rough rides. It was so exciting that we remember it fondly. I don't know if I could enjoy it as much now! It was sure fine then.

MR. GROSSMAN: I can sure understand that! Well thanks, Vern!

MR. BYRD: Sure!